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**MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES**

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**The Soviet – Afghan War, 1979-1989:  
Failures in Irregular Warfare**

**SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES**

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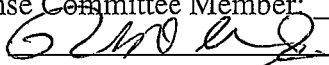
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## **Executive Summary**

**Title:** The Soviet – Afghan War, 1979-1989: A Failure in Irregular Warfare

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**Thesis:** The Soviets lost in Afghanistan because they failed to adapt to the requirements of irregular warfare.

**Discussion:** The purpose of this study is to examine why the Soviets lost in Afghanistan. There have been different reasons given for the Soviet loss. One popular reason includes lack of support from Moscow to continue the war, while yet another claims it was the support to the Mujahideen from such outside sources as the United States that ultimately defeated the Red Army. Both reasons added to the Soviet defeat but were not at the root of their failure. Soviet doctrine, force structure, training, and tactics during that era explain their success during the invasion. It also underscores the reason for their failures and ultimate defeat when faced with the insurgency. The study examines why the Soviet force was ill-suited for the irregular warfare environment during the occupation mission and why its lessons are still relevant today.

**Conclusion:** The failure of the Red Army to adapt to the requirements of irregular warfare stemmed from an ideology in the Soviet war-fighting culture that relied heavily on conventional operations. The Soviets lacked the doctrine, force structure or training to implement the unconventional tactics required to successfully engage the Mujahideen.

## Preface

My interest in the Soviet-Afghan War goes back to my childhood. In the mid-1980s, I befriended a group of teens that had recently moved into our neighborhood from Afghanistan. They were all related but were not your typical family. They were a mix of cousins and other siblings with relatively few adults in the group. After getting to know them and gaining their trust, they told me more about their past. They were refugees who had fled Afghanistan to avoid the fate of many of their family members who had recently died in the war. Some went so far as to tell me about their personal involvement in fighting the Soviets. Their story intrigued me. For a kid living a relatively safe and normal life, I could not conceive the concept of losing my family or personally engaging in combat at such a young age. It was a story that furthered my interest as I would eventually see the Afghan people hand the mighty Soviet Army a crushing defeat. The "David and Goliath" aspect of the story was awesome, especially knowing what my friends and their families had endured.

Many years later, at the Marine Corps Command and Staff College, an opportunity presented itself to choose a military campaign to research and analyze. Without hesitation I chose the Soviet-Afghan War. This would be my chance to get the facts about the war and find out why the Soviets had lost.

My research, while more than sufficient to meet the requirements of the campaign analysis paper, still failed to convince me of the underlining reasons behind the Soviet loss. I decided to continue and make this the topic of my master's thesis. The many subjects covered in the syllabus were of great value, particularly as they applied to unconventional warfare. The historic and contemporary examples of successes and

failures in “small wars” helped focus my thesis. Further research solidified my argument that the Soviets lost because they failed to adapt to the requirements of irregular warfare.

My motivation was more than just to answer a question that was some 20 years old. I felt the topic had a great deal of relevance as we continue to engage in irregular operations around the globe. The parallels of a superpower fighting in Afghanistan also gave it further importance as our efforts in the Afghan terrain continue to be a priority of national security.

Throughout the year, I have had support from numerous individuals. My faculty advisors, Dr. Craig A. Swanson, Professor Erin M. Simpson and Lieutenant Colonel Julian D. Alford, USMC were a tremendous assistance. Their patience, skill, and enthusiasm were essential to my success in completing this thesis.

My mentor, Dr. Doug E. Streusand, has played an integral role in helping me throughout my research. He was always eager to provide guidance when required and ready to bring me back on the path to success when he noticed me veering off.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge my family, which has patiently stood by my side throughout my career. This past year, they have made every effort to give me the time and support required to complete the many requirements. They have been my biggest fans and the motivation to succeed in this and all endeavors.

## Introduction

Long before the United States was forced into an engagement against the Taliban regime in the aftermath of events of 11 September 2001, another superpower, arguably just as capable, had attempted to impose its will and policies on the people of Afghanistan with disastrous results. Most Russians would rather forget the 1979-1989 Soviet-Afghan War. It was an experience costly in not only lives and money, but ultimately in a humiliating defeat that added to the eventual demise of the Soviet Union.

The lessons learned from the Soviet failures were a critical element of U.S. plans for Operation Enduring Freedom. Although both nations had different reasons for invading Afghanistan, the concept of a superpower engaging a Third World, tribal society in the same terrain had obvious parallels that had U.S. commanders concerned. Soviet reliance on a conventional, industrial force with previous successes in East Germany, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, proved disastrous in Afghanistan. It was a struggle ill-suited for a force dependent on conventional doctrine, structure, and training. The Soviets lost in Afghanistan because they failed to adapt to the requirements of irregular warfare.

The shock of the defeat has inspired many theorists to analyze the campaign to determine the cause of the Soviet debacle. Some argue that it was the intervention of the United States with its aid to the Afghan rebels, the Mujahideen – in particular the supply of Stinger anti-aircraft missiles in 1986 – that shifted the balance toward an Afghan victory.<sup>1</sup> Yet others argue that the post-Brezhnev leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, who was unwilling to support the unexpected protracted war, is what ultimately led to the Soviet withdrawal in 1989.<sup>2</sup>

Both arguments have their merits and play a significant role in adding to the complex Afghan problem; but neither was at the root of the Soviet fiasco. With the advent of most battlefield technologies – specifically the Stinger missile to the Afghans – a certain level of gain will likely be realized. But to pin the outcome of the entire campaign on the Stinger is absurd, especially given the fact that the Mujahideen had successfully resisted the Soviets for 7 years leading up to the arrival of the missiles. And although the lack of military support had obvious detrimental effects on the war effort, its improvement would not have solved the underlining issue at the root of the problem.

The Red Army was a conventional force designed, outfitted, and trained to conduct high-intensity battles against similarly organized forces in the European arena. And although the force was adequately prepared to undertake an invasion, a subsequent protracted insurgency in the austere Afghan environment was not anticipated. Irregular warfare, specifically counter-insurgency, was not part of Soviet ideology therefore crippling the force when it found itself in the midst of battling an elusive guerilla enemy.

In assessing the Soviet failures to adapt to irregular warfare, three particular facets are examined:

1. Military doctrine
2. Force structure and training
3. Tactics

Analysis of these three areas will focus on how the Soviets were ill-prepared from the outset of the campaign; how little adaptation occurred in these areas during the ten-year struggle; and ultimately why these factors lent to the defeat.

## Military Doctrine

Military doctrine for most nation-states focuses on certain common aspects that help shape and formulate their particular policies, not the least of which involves current or expected threats. In developing doctrine some basic questions arise:

- “What enemy will have to be faced in a possible war?
- What is the nature of the war in which the state and its armed forces will have to take part; what goals and missions might they be faced with in this war?
- What armed forces are needed to complete the assigned missions and in what direction must military development be carried out?
- How are preparations for war to be implemented?
- What methods must be used to wage war?”<sup>3</sup>

Soviet efforts toward strategic nuclear capability are logical given the threatening state of the world throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the years leading up to the invasion, concerns for small-scale irregular operations were, for the most part, understandably low in the Red Army. For some 30 years, Soviet focus in doctrine had been on large-scale, conventional, force-on-force type operations, with a great emphasis placed on the possibility of involvement in a full-scale nuclear war.<sup>4</sup>

After World War II, the United States was the only powerful adversary capable of wielding any significant threat against the Soviet Union. Although many neighboring European nations were capable of using some level force, the true threat evolved after alliances were formed. The establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949 gave the Soviet Union some cause for concern, particularly after the United States was brought into the

alliance. Over the years these concerns intensified as each superpower prepared for what seemed to be an inevitable military engagement of catastrophic proportions. The Soviet focus toward NATO, and in particular the United States, is thus understandable.

In 1979, there were two possible scenarios for the nature of war between NATO and the Soviet Union. The first involved a full-scale, European engagement that required most of their conventional forces which had been staged and prepared for such operations. The second, and least favorable due to its catastrophic implications, was the nuclear scenario. Depending on the level of the threat, it would involve either a partial or complete nuclear strike against those states threatening the Soviet Union. Either scenario called for full-scale, conventional battle, thus their doctrine had to prepare for such probable engagements.

When analyzing the nature of war from which the Soviets were building their doctrine, to include the size of the adversary they would face, coupled with the advent and proliferation of nuclear arsenals, it follows that outmatching the adversary was a must to ensure survival of the regime. Historically, Soviet doctrine was built upon a defensive strategy with military force restricted to only defending Russia and its aligned partner nation-states.<sup>5</sup> In 1974, the threat of the encroachment of capitalism among bordering states led the communist regime to adopt a more external role for the military, one of power projection and presence.<sup>6</sup> This push toward a “power projection and presence” concept, much as is practiced in other Western models, is a hallmark of showcasing a conventional warfare capability in an effort to deter possible foreign aggression, furthering the Soviet adherence to a doctrine of “regular” warfare. This idea of “muscle-flexing” or demonstration of military might – much as was exercised during the Afghan invasion – would be a significant deterrent to quell any possible retaliation.

Soviet doctrine during this period demonstrates a continued push for technological advancements across the services as well as an increase in numbers of reserve and conscripted troops. Their goal was to outgun and overmatch the U.S. By the early 1980s Soviet strategic nuclear forces were at a level at least at parity with other NATO countries with a noted superiority in numbers of tanks and men.<sup>7</sup>

The Kremlin priority was keeping its status as a military superpower. "New land-based missiles, nuclear submarines, and long-range aircraft were developed and deployed on a regular basis. There were constant improvements of aircraft, tanks, and other theatre weapons."<sup>8</sup> The pursuit of these advancements further indicates a pre-occupation with the possibility of a major world war, with relatively little discussion on preparations for other types of conflicts.

The Soviet concept of operations during the invasion of Afghanistan – in the midst of the Cold War – demonstrates this belief of superior military might to overpower a poorly-armed and equipped opponent.<sup>9</sup> The myopic assessment drove the Red Army to rely on relatively small numbers of troops to support armament such as tanks, aircraft and artillery that were designed and trained for a conventional northern European plain war.<sup>10</sup> A system reliant on conventional armament, modeled against a Western opponent, and designed for a particular environment proved costly to the Soviets in executing the subsequent counter-insurgent mission. The existing Soviet doctrine proved ill-suited to match opposition and situations other than those waged in large-scale, conventional terms.

Doctrine development in 1979 demonstrates a continued emphasis in the areas of major operations, both conventional and nuclear, against NATO countries. Soviet strategy during this era viewed future world wars as a decisive clash between socialist and capitalist systems.<sup>11</sup> It would be waged using all the military, economic, and spiritual forces of the combatant states,

coalitions and social systems, unprecedented in scale and violence, and without compromise.<sup>12</sup> Preparing for and supporting such a war demands the availability of multimillion mass armies, which is practically impossible to support during peacetime.<sup>13</sup> In this regard, the invasion of Afghanistan, while ultimately undertaken for strategic reasons, served another purpose. It supported a requirement discussed in Soviet doctrine for mobilization deployments to ensure the combat readiness of an otherwise ill-prepared, inexperienced force.<sup>14</sup> It was “practice” in preparation for the “big game.” This helps explain the mismatch of contemporary doctrine to the requirements in the Afghan theatre.

Soviet strategy during this time has all the hallmarks of a formidable force prepared for both conventional and nuclear conflict against an assumed Western opponent. It fails to provide indicators of adequate preparation or guidance to successfully meet the challenges of smaller, unconventional conflicts. Classic Soviet doctrine, which had changed little since the 1920s and 30s, including the concepts of mass and deep penetration of enemy defenses, proved flawed when combating the Mujahideen rebels that refused to abide by a Western theory of battle.<sup>15</sup> This failure to acknowledge and incorporate unconventional concepts into doctrine contributed significantly to Soviet inability to operate in the irregular environment.

### Force Structure and Training

Force structure and training of a military unit, regardless of service or operation, plays a significant role in determining success or failure in any given operation. Given their resources in materiel and personnel, commanders typically organize units on how they envision subsequent

engagements on the battlefield. Training is tailored to the capabilities and limitations of the unit with a focus on the expectant threats.

The Soviet military – particularly during the early years of the war – was not appropriately structured or adequately trained to counter the environment and opponent they would be facing in Afghanistan. As was noted previously with regard to doctrine in conventional war, forces were organized and trained to fight a northern European plain battle, matched against an adversary with similar capabilities, organization, and tactics. “While the Soviets have in the past shown a strategic appreciation for limited war, they were put in the awkward position of having a force structure and operational and tactical doctrines that did not match the military situation.”<sup>16</sup> Afghanistan and the Mujahideen were a distinct challenge with a different set of rules that refused to match the anticipated Soviet concept of operations.

The actual invasion of Afghanistan was a classic Soviet operation. The Soviets used combined airborne and ground forces to occupy the key installations of the Afghan regime in a day. The Red Army used all their key trademarks of surprise, offensive battle, strategic initiative, and deception to successfully topple the struggling Afghan government.<sup>17</sup> They had proven successes in the past during similar operations to topple regimes. Soviet force structure, doctrine and experience in Hungary and Czechoslovakia fit the requirement of installing a new government. They did not fit the mission of imposing control in the countryside. The Soviets took over a regime that was losing its hold over the country to the insurgents. Taking over the government meant taking over a counterinsurgency. The Soviets did not expect to face an insurgency and lacked the force structure and mindset for successful counterinsurgency. Unlike Hungary and Czechoslovakia, Afghanistan would eventually force a Soviet withdrawal after an unanticipated irregular war.

The Soviets never successfully transitioned to the irregular environment, relying on many of the same types of organizations that were employed during the invasion. Training was limited to basic field operations with little to no training in countering the new threats or the mountainous terrain. One of the few exceptions was the SPETSNAZ, the Soviet Special Forces, which were trained for unconventional operations. While the elite SPETSNAZ provided an irregular capability to the Red Army, their strengths were in insurgent operations vice the necessary counterinsurgent battle. Additionally, their numbers were few thus leaving the majority of operations to regular troops who lacked the requisite training.

Most Soviet troops in Afghanistan were either young conscripts or reservists, who were compelled to join the Russian army for approximately 2 years. Many of the troops that arrived in theatre had practically no training. There are reports of conscripts receiving just a uniform and some food during their first few weeks in the military before reporting for duty in Afghanistan with no weapon and no training at all. While some of these troops received minimal training upon arrival in-country, there are reports of yet others who were immediately dispatched to areas to take part in village clearing and house-to-house searches.<sup>18</sup>

These same ill-prepared troops were also poorly fed and maltreated during their tours in the inhospitable Afghan environment. This situation coupled with the daily grind of sentry duty and boredom caused many to seek solace in drugs and alcohol. It created a tremendous morale issue which manifested itself in numerous reports of robbery, rape and murder inflicted among the Afghan civilians.<sup>19</sup> The numerous atrocities worked against attempts to win over the confidence of the populace, thus depriving the Soviets of this critical piece in the counterinsurgent battle.

The military leadership had fundamental issues as well. The officer corps consisted of mostly junior personnel with relatively little experience in their respective fields. The non-commissioned officers (NCOs) - the wealth of experience and leadership in most combat units - were suffering from significant shortages and were practically non-existent in Afghanistan. "Career NCOs", typical in many other Western forces, were not a principal component of the Soviet force. Many of these shortfalls were offset during the invasion due to the type of rehearsed operation being conducted coupled with the overwhelming force applied by the Red Army. But the lack of qualified leadership and experience at all levels plagued these units during the follow-on occupation. It was the foundation for many of the poor decisions that were made throughout the campaign.

Most conventional operations tend to follow structured guidelines which allow for a more rigid, textbook approach with regard to technique. Irregular warfare, by definition, depicts an environment that lacks such structure. It demands different skill sets in order to negotiate the many unique aspects that may be encountered. It goes beyond a mere "point-and-shoot" mentality. It demands a mindset that is not only adaptive, but savvy in character to adjust to the challenging non-conventional nature of such operations. Troops tasked with such a mission require the requisite training tailored to this type of unconventional environment. The Soviet soldiers tasked with dealing with the Afghan populace after the invasion lacked such a capability.

Minimal training, inexperienced leadership and a relatively small force also factored into a very centralized command and control structure which would have negative implications on operations at the tactical level. Given the nature of irregular warfare coupled with the limited force totaling some 100,000 troops tasked with controlling the expansive Afghan terrain, it is

apparent to see how this highly centralized command and control structure would hamper decisions in the field. The structure was an inherent characteristic of the Soviet command model. On many occasions commanders in-country were forced to communicate directly with Moscow on particular time-sensitive battlefield decisions. The dynamic nature of irregular operations requires an independent, decentralized command and control construct whereby many time-critical decisions are made promptly at the appropriate subordinate level.<sup>20</sup> Responsibilities must be bestowed to the junior leadership in the engagements. It allows initiative in the absence of further guidance or limited communication ability. Reluctance to modify the command and control structure in the face of ongoing failures typified the obstinate nature of the Soviet leadership.

The typical organization of Soviet infantry units operating against Mujahideen rebels was centered on the motorized rifle units. While experiments were made later to better structure these units to be more effective in countering the insurgency, these units continued to be a marriage of soldiers and armored personnel carriers where troops were never to be more than 200 meters from their vehicles.<sup>21</sup> Soviet tanks, the pride of the Red Army, were originally designed for conventional battle on the wide open steppes of Europe and China.<sup>22</sup> Despite their obvious incompatibility with the rugged mountainous terrain, they were also included as an integral element to the Afghan war.

Early into the struggle, the Mujahideen had attempted to engage the Soviet Army in a conventional manner. They maintained their large forces in an organization much like their adversary, which was understandable given the fact that much of the equipment and training was furnished by the same Russians over the preceding years.<sup>23</sup> Realizing that they were no match and would ultimately be defeated with such an organization, the Mujahideen quickly

disestablished their army and took up arms in an unconventional method. They employed traditional hit-and-run tactics with a structure and technique that was familiar to the Afghan rebels. It proved effective in exploiting the Soviet vulnerabilities. The Mujahideen demonstrated an impressive ability in assessing and adapting to the threat by falling back on their strengths and assuming a "home-field advantage". They understood irregular warfare and the importance of such concepts as critical vulnerabilities and centers of gravity. They devised their attacks with these precepts in mind. The Mujahideen took full advantage of inflicting crushing blows at every opportunity, whittling away at an already exhausted Soviet morale with every attack.

To say the Soviets never attempted to join in the irregular fight would be incorrect. As was noted previously with regard to organization of ground troops, some changes in structure were eventually implemented. Unfortunately for the Soviets, many attempts to restructure either never fully materialized on the battlefield, or worse, had a complete opposite effect than what was originally planned. The Soviet use of Central Asian conscripts in their force structure is such an ironic example. What seemed initially to be an effective plan would eventually backfire and have staggering unanticipated consequences.

On the surface it appeared that the addition of these Central Asians troops to augment the Red Army force structure would be an integral part of infiltrating and swaying the Afghan rebels toward a more reconciliatory posture. The Soviet logic was understandable since these troops were ethnically similar and would likely be better accepted by the local population than their Slavic counterparts. So much credence was put on this belief that a significantly greater proportion of these troops were placed in Afghanistan. There is a possibility that these Central Asian troops may have proven to be a suitable force multiplier had they been held in the same

regard as the traditional Slavic soldier, but such was not the case. These ethnically diverse troops were constantly discriminated against by other Russian troops. The reality that the Afghan fight was not held in particularly high regard among many in the service only added to further alienate this element of the Soviet Army. So much was the dissention that many of these troops either acted as enablers to the insurgent cause or simply defected to the Mujahideen.

Soviet failure in this realm was due to an overestimation and overutilization of an ill-treated indigenous force. There was an added unrealistic expectation that these individuals would suddenly react against their Afghan kin in favor of their Russian oppressors. Many successful irregular operations are conducted with the assistance of native forces, but their use must be tempered and carefully managed. An effective unit will ensure indigenous forces are proportionately divided among units, and possible friction between the regular and native troops avoided.<sup>24</sup> Over-reliance on these forces can also cause obvious issues of operational and internal security. Troops assigned to work with such indigenous forces should strive to learn the language and terrain as soon as possible so that they may dispense with these individuals in so far as the situation warrants.<sup>25</sup>

The Afghan situation also warranted significantly more troops for the occupation than was apportioned by Moscow. In an insurgent operation, an occupation force must have a large enough footprint to adequately influence and control the population throughout the country. They must also have the ability to simultaneously engage the insurgents in a kinetic battle. The Soviets had neither. Despite multiple requests by commanders for increases in troop numbers, Moscow refused. They believed that Soviet military superiority with the forces currently allotted was sufficient. Units were spread so thin due to numerous security requirements of garrisons and convoy routes that offensive forces suffered considerable shortfalls, particularly in requirements

to control previous Mujahideen strongholds. Despite many tactical victories by the Red Army, they would amount to little as forces were unable to hold the many areas in the countryside.

These shortfalls in force structure and training of the Red Army were a direct contributor to the failures during the occupation. Soviet leadership designed, prepared and ultimately committed their force for a war scripted in typical conventional fashion. Unaware of its considerable inability to counter a lesser Third World threat, the Soviet Army would be forced to engage an irregular adversary who it was neither structured nor trained to defeat.

### Tactics

Doctrine, force structure and training are facets of a military organization that help illustrate how units will operate at the tactical level. Either of these aspects in and of themselves will not be the decisive factor in an irregular operation. They are merely elements – albeit significant ones – of the overall character of these units. They all build upon each other and formulate the end product which will determine success or failure. It was this end product, the tactics, which ultimately sealed the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan.

To succeed in irregular warfare, specifically a counterinsurgent operation, there is one element that has historically been proven to be crucial time and again. It is an element of the operational environment that is obvious, yet many times taken for granted. Many occupation forces in similar situations that have ignored its presence and significant influence have determined their own inevitable defeat. The judge of success or failure, the key to defeating an insurgency lies, ultimately, in the will of the local people.

In a traditional engagement, a force that is superior in industry and organization would appear to have the distinct advantage over the lesser opponent and would thus appear as the obvious victor in any subsequent battle. In conventional terms this tends to ring true. Although, when we look at irregular operations, these same otherwise advantageous features carry less weight and may, in fact, be a liability if not properly managed. Such was the case for the Soviet occupation force.

As was discussed previously, the Mujahideen quickly determined that engaging the Red Army in the preferred Soviet fashion of traditional warfare would yield certain defeat for the insurgents. The subsequent transition to guerilla warfare marked the turning point in the campaign. It initiated the downfall of an occupation force relentlessly determined to abide by what had achieved success in the past. The Soviets were frustrated at the constant inability to achieve any real gain against the Mujahideen while additionally suffering significant losses of men and materiel. The Red Army continued to leverage their strength in armament and expanded their tactics to include engagements against anything that supported the insurgents, namely the Afghan populace.

Targeting the populace is a fundamental precept of counter-insurgent warfare. The will of the civilian population is the key to succeed in such operations, regardless of overwhelming conventional capabilities. The Soviets soon realized that the civilian population was indeed at the very root of determining victory, although they chose to target the Afghans in a different manner. They recognized that the strength of the Mujahideen was due to the support of the people. They knew that without this support the insurgency would ultimately be defeated. It was a correct assumption, although the Soviet idea of ending that support meant eliminating the people. Instead of attempting to win over the will of the population, which can arguably be more

complex and time-consuming, the Soviets focused their operations on eliminating those areas sympathetic to the insurgent cause.

The Red Army targeted not only select sites that were suspected support bases for the Mujahideen, but waged an extensive onslaught which involved bombing and mining numerous villages, irrigation systems, and crops. This controversial "scorched earth" policy was geared towards terrorizing and intimidating the population from supporting the insurgency or simply abandoning those areas of intense resistance. The use of mines and chemicals, planned originally to be used against the Mujahideen, were soon indiscriminately employed throughout the country. The devastating policy claimed countless civilian lives including women and children. It drew international scrutiny and had unanticipated implications as sympathetic observers increased assistance to Afghan rebels.

The belief that these "scorched earth" tactics would eliminate the support base for the insurgency and ultimately defeat the Mujahideen demonstrates Soviet inability to understand and adapt to irregular warfare. The direct targeting of Afghan civilians had the exact opposite effect, much like the excessive use of Central Asian conscripts as an attempt to mitigate issues with the local populace. It fueled the insurgent cause and gave the Mujahideen increased support from both Afghans and interested parties abroad. Additionally, it further undermined any prospect to legitimize the Soviet ideological cause of their purpose.

Soviet intelligence sources were greatly underutilized, adding further to the counterinsurgency problem. The lack of regular troops required that other more specialized soldiers augment the regular units. Reconnaissance forces that were an integral part of operations, especially against the insurgency, were being used in active combat roles instead of

where they would be most useful. Consequently, the Soviets often failed to find the Mujahideen unless the Afghans wanted to be found.<sup>26</sup>

Tactics were additionally hampered by equipment that was either cumbersome or ill-suited for the mission. The terrain and threat demanded gear that enhanced the ability of troops to hunt the Mujahideen through the mountainous Afghan landscape. Light infantry would have been ideal for such missions, but the Soviets lacked such a capability. Instead, Red Army regular soldiers were expected to engage and eventually pursue the lighter adversary through the inhospitable terrain. Being tied to armored personnel carriers had troops also reliant on the heavy equipment that went with those vehicles including heavy flak jackets, rucksacks, and automatic weapons.

Soviet emphasis on massed firepower instead of accuracy also plagued these units if they had to dismount their vehicles.<sup>27</sup> Most crew-served weapons were heavy and required large amounts of ammunition. This significantly degraded the troops once on foot. Irregular operations require a soldier that is unencumbered by his equipment. On the contrary, his gear should enhance his ability to conduct such actions, not aggravate it. Outfitting these troops with such extra gear reduces essential mobility and results in ineffectiveness in combat.<sup>28</sup>

Even such obvious details as having the appropriate clothing and footgear for the environment were amiss with the Soviets. The troops were clothed in restrictive and uncomfortable uniforms that had a northern European camouflage appearance, instead of a more ideal mountainous one.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, the issued boots of the regulars were noisy and unsuitable for climbing in the mountains. These types of operations may have troops on foot for considerable durations, many times immersed in harsh conditions. The uniforms must be tactically sound – correct camouflage, for example. They must also be designed with the

irregular operator in mind, given the austere conditions and extensive terrain they typically negotiate. A unit inadequately outfitted from the outset will be unquestionably degraded during subsequent operations.

To say Soviet tactics were flawed for the Afghan situation would be an understatement. The tactics employed not only assured Soviet defeat, but were essentially criminal with regard to the proven atrocities waged against Afghan civilians. They were noteworthy both in regard to lack of combat effectiveness and in its ability to ostracize the populace. Moreover, their actions went so far as to unintentionally garner support from abroad for the Mujahideen. A failure in all regards. Inability to understand and effectively adapt to irregular warfare was evident throughout the force. It ultimately resulted in irreparable damage to the mission and to the integrity of the Soviet Union.

### Conclusion

As the United States finds itself waged in similar irregular operations around the globe, be it in Iraq or in the same Afghan terrain, the lessons learned by the Soviets must be heeded and factored into all future plans at every level of command. They are lessons that had been learned years earlier in such places as the Philippines and Malaysia with great success, but had obviously not transcended Soviet convictions on warfare methodology. A commitment to fighting a war on conventional terms, with staunch reluctance to change from the strategic and operational levels, laid the foundation for the subsequent Soviet defeat. The limited adaptability and misapplication of methods demonstrated an inability to comprehend the requirements to succeed in irregular

warfare. While failures were ultimately manifested in the tactical arena, the groundwork was initially laid at the strategic and operational levels.

Although irregular warfare brings to mind myriad of tactical engagements of both kinetic and non-kinetic nature, it must be understood that support for such operations begins at the highest level. The strategy of a nation must acknowledge such threats and the requirements to adequately defeat them. If the strategic focus of a state is built upon industry and technology, with a metric of troop numbers and armament to determine capability, then it follows that all subordinate levels will abide by the guidance and plan accordingly. Such insular planning for a given focus will lead to advantages in an anticipated mission, but inadequate posturing toward other unforeseen threats.

The force structure and training of a force is an integral piece that must continually be evaluated to determine suitable congruence to possible threats. The Soviet lesson demonstrates why prior successes must not be a sole determinant in force preparation or design. Their failure in Afghanistan demonstrates how bias toward one particular adversary while discounting others can prove problematic when those other threats arise. A force that is organized and prepared for both conventional and irregular operations is a force that is better postured for the next campaign.

The mindset of the force, at all levels, must also understand and accept the realities and intricacies of the different methods of warfare. Basic warfighting principles applicable to all wars, such as understanding the power of the will of the people, should be instilled down to the lowest level. And tactics should mirror these same precepts and be frequently assessed to ensure compliance, especially once engaged against a threat. To blindly assume that tactics that were

effective in a different time and place will have similar results in another situation is a faulty assumption.

Irregular warfare has been waged throughout history and will continue to exist for as long as there are conflicts in the world. It will remain a focus for national security as the United States and its allies find themselves operating throughout the world in support of the Global War on Terror. The days of conventional force-on-force wars, much like those waged in World Wars I and II, may very well be behind us. The world has understandably become less acceptant of such implausible carnage. The possibility of escalation to nuclear disaster may very well be the main deterrent against waging traditional war today. But that does not mean a lack of belligerent states or other global security issues or concerns which may necessitate military action. Thus irregular warfare continues to find a home where both its kinetic and non-kinetic operations can result in much the same strategic consequences that its conventional alternative had in the past. We must be prepared to acknowledge deficiencies in this type of war and adapt accordingly in the unconventional environment lest we become much like the Soviets in Afghanistan, the victims of irregular warfare.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Richard H. Shultz and Andrea J. Dew, Insurgents, Terrorists and Militias: The Warriors of Contemporary Combat. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 173-174.
- <sup>2</sup> Amin Saikal, Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival. (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 200.
- <sup>3</sup> Harriet Fast Scott and William F. Scott, The Soviet Art of War: Doctrine, Strategy, and Tactics. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1982), 4-5.
- <sup>4</sup> V.D. Sokolovskiy, Soviet Military Strategy. (New York: Crane, Russak & Company, Inc., 1975), 276.
- <sup>5</sup> Scott, 13.
- <sup>6</sup> Scott, 13.
- <sup>7</sup> Scott, 13.
- <sup>8</sup> Scott, 241.
- <sup>9</sup> Scott, 294.
- <sup>10</sup> Lester W. Grau, The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan. (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1996), 202.
- <sup>11</sup> Scott, 246.
- <sup>12</sup> Scott, 247.
- <sup>13</sup> Scott, 248.
- <sup>14</sup> Scott, 248.
- <sup>15</sup> Scott, 295.
- <sup>16</sup> Joseph J. Collins, The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: A Study in the Use of Force in Soviet Foreign Policy. (Lexington, MA/Toronto: Lexington Books, 1986), 168.
- <sup>17</sup> Scott, 295.
- <sup>18</sup> Brigadier Mohammad Yousaf and Major Mark Adkin, The Bear Trap: Afghanistan's Untold Story. (London: Redwood Press, 1992), 54-55.
- <sup>19</sup> Yousaf, 55-56.
- <sup>20</sup> Collins, 168.
- <sup>21</sup> Grau, 205.
- <sup>22</sup> Shultz, 171.
- <sup>23</sup> Shultz, 169.
- <sup>24</sup> United States Marine Corps, Small Wars Manual. (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1940), 6-20.
- <sup>25</sup> USMC, 6-20.
- <sup>26</sup> Grau, 205.
- <sup>27</sup> Grau, 206.
- <sup>28</sup> USMC, 2-41.
- <sup>29</sup> Grau, 205.

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